Livingston County Poor Farm

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For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: October 30, 2019

In every society, there is a very small percentage of the population that can not care for themselves. This group includes the very poor, the sick, the incapacitated, orphans, widows, the elderly, and the insane.

Livingston County was first formed in 1837. After the county was formed, people in this group were cared for by private persons who were paid from the county treasury. The responsibility of finding homes for them and contracting for their care was in the hands of the Justices of the Peace. The Justices would farm the indigent people out to private citizen bidders. This contracting arrangement was discontinued in 1849 due to a state law change. It was replaced with a system of three overseers of the poor for each precinct. The three overseers were appointed by the county court.

Livingston county had a rapid increase in population as more and more settlers arrived. This great increase in the population prompted a search for a better method of helping the indigent. A general movement throughout the state began for centralizing the housing, care, and supervision of the indigent. Changes in Illinois state law required the county to make appropriations, to be levied and collected in the same manner as other county revenue, for the support of the indigent. As an extension of this fiscal function, the county was required to appoint an overseer of the poor in every township and establish a county poorhouse if necessary. This change in state law caused both McLean and Livingston counties to set up poor farms.

In 1859, Livingston County purchased a farm of 160 acres in Eppards Point Township, four miles southwest of Pontiac, for housing and caring for the poor and insane of the county. A building was erected almost immediately on this site. Additional purchases of farm land expanded the site to 220 acres. A second building was added in 1872, and a third building specifically for the insane, was added in 1878.

The overseer of the poor farm was usually a married man who had a farming background. An 1878 Livingston County history book reported that Hilton Woodbury was the overseer of the poor farm. Hilton was a thirty-five year old farmer who was married and had five children. It was recounted that very few people were qualified or could adapt to the overseer position. He seemed to be the right person to care for the unfortunate and insane under his charge. His discipline was good, with kindness and firmness being used for the government of the inmates. This book recounted that if people had friends confined in the new asylum building, they should be especially glad their friends have a good home and will receive kind care in the new and elegant asylum at the poor farm.

In September of 1894, the cornerstone for a large brick building was laid. This brick building had an estimated cost of $75,000. This amount of money would be equivalent to $2.2 million in today's dollars. This building served as the poor farm main facility for about seventy-five years. It was torn down in 1970.

According to the poor farm record books, the cause of pauperism was noted for each inmate. These causes included sore feet, homeless, hurt on railroad, kicked by horse, family row, whiskey, blood poison, deserted by husband, and ugly disposition.

There was a negative stigma to being sent to the poor farm. Indeed, according to the 1911 report of the Illinois State Charities Commission: “The deserving poor are loathe to apply for alms. They conceal their plight. Mortification accompanies honest misfortune. To be unable in the stress of economic severity to sustain one’s self and family intensifies shame. The stings of poverty wound the heart long before they are felt in the flesh.”

A review of the Blade newspaper during the eighty-eight years the poor farm was in operation, found only one reference to a Fairbury resident being sent to the poor farm. The July 28, 1888, Blade reported that "Pap" Miller and his wife were taken to the county poor farm. The Blade reported the aged couple will be properly cared for at the poor farm.

The number of inmates at the poor farm varied each year. All of the published reports for various years show a daily inmate population below fifty people. In many years, the population was less than twenty people.

The Social Security Act was signed into law by President Roosevelt on August 14, 1935. This new law provided a pension for workers over the age of sixty-five. Monthly payments to recipients began in 1940. This program dramatically reduced the number of elderly people who had no income to support themselves during the last portion of their lives.

By the late 1940s, it became obvious the advent of the old-age pensions paid by Social Security was eliminating the need for poor farms. There was still a need for nursing home facilities to care for the aged. In 1947, the Livingston County poor farm was converted to a nursing home facility. The Pantagraph applauded Livingston County for making this decision, and tried to prompt McLean County to convert their poor farm to a nursing home also.

A new nursing home facility was built adjacent to the large 1894 brick poor farm building. The massive old brick building was torn down in 1970 after about seventy-five years of service. The nursing home was torn down in 2017. All that remains of the poor farm and subsequent nursing home is the small poor farm cemetery.

Indigent people who died at the poor farm were buried in the small cemetery about a quarter mile south of the main poor farm site. To save taxpayer money, full-size tombstones were not provided for these graves. A small stone pillar, about four by four

inches and twenty-four inches tall was provided. On top of this pillar was a number. To find where a person was buried, you would need to refer to a record book that associated the numbers with their respective names.

This small cemetery became forgotten and overgrown by trees and brush. Through the efforts of volunteers, this cemetery was restored. A sign was erected which explains which names match the marker numbers.

This little cemetery is the only remaining reminder of the stories of hundreds of people who were homeless, not wanted by their families, or suffering. The poor farm gave them a sense of belonging and a thin ray of hope.

1947 Photo of Main Building at Livingston County Poor Farm south of Pontiac.